



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

## 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 1989

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 01/01/1989

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## **NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE**

This article has been contributed by R.W. Fergie.

### **HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MOVING IMAGES AND RECORDED SOUND**

Screen and sound recordings are media which can entertain, inform and influence us.

As entertainment media, moving images and recorded sound reflect the popular culture of their time. Now, through radio and television transmission, they have become the principal means of informing and influencing the community.

Their news component creates a visual and oral record of history as it is happening, unthinkable in former ages. They have proved to be powerful and insidious shapers of public attitudes, at once beneficial and dangerous. (1)

As cultural artefacts, recorded sound and moving images represent a rich historical resource which are as valuable as the record preserved in the written word and artefacts of libraries, museums, galleries, archives and historical sites. Properly preserved, they can bring the past to life in a singularly direct and graphic manner.

This revolution in the recording and transmission of information has happened in the last 50 years or so and it has taken some decades for the archival institutions of the world to recognise the need to collect and preserve screen and sound recordings. By then they were being overrun by the rapidly growing but impermanent output. Even now, the effort to preserve and catalogue falls far short of the protection, long taken for granted, of the output of literature, works of art and other historical material.

### **AN AWAKENING CULTURAL PERCEPTION IN AUSTRALIA**

In Australia, archiving of film and sound material was first taken up tentatively around 1936 by the Commonwealth National Library in Canberra. This continued as the National Film Archive and Sound Recording Section of the National Library of Australia.

In April 1984, the Government grasped the responsibility much more firmly when it established the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra as an autonomous office within the then Department of Home Affairs and Environment, absorbing the National Library's film and sound

sections. Concurrently, the National Film and Sound Archive Advisory Committee was appointed to plan for the future of the Archive.

## **ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT**

The 1985 Report of the Advisory Committee, **Time in Our Hands** still provides the most definitive statement of the problems and possibilities.

The Report's recommendations envisaged the Archive becoming a major cultural institution, preserving and celebrating Australia's screen and sound heritage. Basic requirements identified were building extension and re-equipped to facilitate preservation; cataloguing and presentation operations on a much larger scale; a 5 year development plan for funding and staffing; the creation of a national record of the production of sound and screen media; legislative measures to establish the Archive as an autonomous statutory authority; a charter and policies which define the role, nature and philosophies; and the establishment of an Archive office in each State.

Although no comprehensive response to the Report has been made by the Government, development of the film and sound archive system since then has been in general conformity with the Report's recommendations (though not its timetable) within the constraints of a limited budget. At this point, the Archive and its Director remain administratively attached to the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories and are assisted by an Interim Advisory Council appointed by the Minister in June 1987 pending establishment of a Governing Council; it has yet to extend its national office in the former Institute of Anatomy building in Canberra but it has set up offices in Sydney and Melbourne, with an agency in Perth. Its priorities, as detailed in a draft Corporate Plan, focus currently on preservation, acquisition, collection management and the need for public access - and on overcoming immense inherited backlogs in each of these areas.

## **VANISHING HERITAGE**

The heart of the problem of preserving history in sound and film is that much of the prolific output for screen and broadcasting is transitory and of little continuing interest to the producers. Even more so than the printed page, its preservation is dependent on institutional arrangements by government. These will involve intervention at the point at which sound and images are recorded and then special arrangements to ensure the preservation and accessibility of selected material. Television and radio programs, for example, may be wiped soon after broadcasting and even if recordings and films are kept they soon begin to decay. For example, much of the cellulose nitrate film used before 1952 disintegrated or was destroyed (and that which still exists is becoming unstable and is in urgent need of being copied on to more durable film). A parallel problem exists with many of the early sound recordings.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHIVING**

The level of effort required to overcome this archiving backlog is currently beyond the resources which governments so far have been ready to commit.

And as the archivists and the public respond to the need to acquire and preserve sound and film material, the problem of cataloguing and providing access is compounded. At present, the need to acquire and preserve is the more imperative but, since the whole object of preserving sound and screen material is to give access to it, the necessarily labour intensive cataloguing must follow. Cataloguing of the Archive's own rapidly growing collections and the establishment of common cataloguing and other technical standards for other repositories needs urgent attention.

## **SCOPE OF THE ARCHIVES**

The heritage which the Archive is charged to preserve was defined by the Advisory Committee to include, but not to be limited to, the following--

(a) Recorded sound, film, television or other productions comprising moving images and/or recorded sounds created or released within Australia, or by Australians, or with relevance to Australians, whether or not primarily intended for public release.

(b) Objects, materials, works and intangibles relating to the moving image and recorded sound media whether seen from a technical, industrial, cultural, historical or other viewpoint; this shall include material relating to the Australian film, television, broadcasting and sound recording industries and fields such as literature, scripts, stills, posters, advertising material, manuscript material and artefacts such as technical equipment and costumes. It also includes such concepts as the perpetuation of obsolescent skills and environments associated with the presentation of these media.

This subject matter is to be encompassed in all of its manifestations, whether as art, communication, historical phenomenon, or otherwise.

The recommended charter, integrating the functions of museum, library, archives and gallery for such a comprehensive range of media is a daunting one. Coherent philosophy, policies, goals and management systems, relating to it have had to be developed 'on the run' in the course of servicing day-to-day operational needs and 'from the ground up' (overseas counterparts have similar functions but usually in respect of one or other of film, television, radio or sound recording, rather than the combination).

## **FUNCTIONS**

With whatever help it can enlist from the screen and sound industries, it is ultimately the Archive's responsibility to identify, preserve and provide access to this Australian moving image and recorded sound heritage. This means that, in addition to gathering up existing material of historical worth, it must monitor Australian sound and screen production as it occurs and acquire, catalogue and preserve it. To enlist support and interest and to make the material more fully accessible to the public it needs to improve public perception and understanding of the relevance of the screen and sound heritage to our society and national character. There is thus a continuing need to engage in creative research, education and entrepreneurial activity.

## **FACILITIES**

A major building extension and refurbishment program for the Canberra headquarters (a fine, well located but overcrowded heritage building) has been planned to provide for the necessary staff and technical and presentational facilities, including expanded exhibition areas, a public theatre and other visitor facilities. Meanwhile prefabricated buildings are being used on the site. Storage facilities are at a number of less-than-adequate and scattered buildings in Canberra and Sydney but are being consolidated at the Archive's new repository in the Canberra industrial area of Mitchell.

The necessary contact with both producers and users of archival material in a physically large country like Australia calls for convenient facilities in all States, forming part of an integrated national system. In addition to fixed repository, display and access facilities, there is a need for a

roving presence by way of travelling exhibitions - this has naturally been a particular emphasis in the 1988 Bicentennial Year and will be continued. There has also been an effort to take elements of the collection into every home - 'The Australian Image', a television series about the Archive and its mission, has been shown nationally.

## INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

While national and State libraries enjoy the benefit of mandatory deposits of printed publications for preservation purposes, there is no comparable arrangement in Australia for image and sound recordings - the National Film and Sound Archive must rely on voluntary cooperation (which is usually readily given).

In addition to Government funds, the National, Film and Sound Archive actively seeks corporate sponsorship and voluntary support of all kinds. A notable example was the gift of Australia's major cinema newsreel libraries to the Archive by their owners (News Corporation and The Greater Union Group) together with some \$4 million to preserve them through a 5 year project dubbed **Operation Newsreel**.

## SPECIAL PROGRAMS

A number of other special programs have been conducted with generous support for the community - the **Last Film Search** has saved for preservation much of what remains of disintegrating nitrate motion picture film. With the help of the Australian Bicentenary Authority and private sponsors the **Slice of Life** project aims to save the best radio and television coverage of Australia's Bicentenary year and involves some 30 television stations or networks and 60 radio stations.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Archive's Corporate Plan to cover the next 5 years is still in draft and incomplete in respect of detailing its action plans. Given present resource limitations in relation to the challenge of its charter, it focuses on the key short term issues in order to identify and set priorities which may be achievable. It considers that the thrust of the report **Time in our Hands** is still valid and urgent but recognises the Archive's dependence on a growing cultural perception of the need to preserve the moving image and recorded sound heritage of Australia on a basis comparable to that accorded to long established sister institutions.

**(1) Report of the National Film and Sound Archive Advisory Committee, Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment, published November 1985 as Time in our Hands.**

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This page last updated 23 November 2012

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